

3

On the Red Line

A tornado of candy wrappers, newspaper ads, and empty plastic bottles race around the Howard train station, propelled by the frigid Chicago wind. The entire station is mute and still. Only the occasional car can be heard slushing through the surrounding streets. Chris, along with a dozen other passengers, is waiting for the next train to downtown. There's been a delay, some "technical malfunction" to be addressed. Chris staggers along the edge of the platform, his eyes focused on the tracks down below. His toes rest just over the side. Behind him, the other passengers huddle underneath large, overhead heating bulbs, seemingly unaware.

Just an hour ago, Chris stumbled out of his Evanston apartment, trudging through the foot of snow coating the ground. He had no destination in mind. He just kept walking, sinking further and further into the white, snowy abyss. By the time Chris ventured out onto the main streets, his face was wet with melted snow. His fingers stiffened and ached. Overhanging trees rattled in the wind, casting off flurries of flakes from their snow-burdened limbs. But he nevertheless persisted, passing only a handful of people on the way. Everyone marched with purpose, eager to get inside.

Tonight, Chris will once again shadow the streets of this foreign city. What had he expected to find six months ago when he arrived here with nothing but two duffle bags and a paycheck to his name? He no longer knows. He'd arrived with an indistinguishable mix of excitement and fear, the kind of raw energy that reminded him that he was indeed a living and breathing person in the world. After his father's death, Chris spent several months confined to his childhood home in St. Louis, only leaving it to work at the psychiatric hospital in south city, where his father had also worked part time.

Dizzy, Chris now wobbles on the platform, his body leaning towards the tracks. His vision is blurred. The wind cuts at the nape of his neck. He takes a small step backward to stabilize himself, but there's a sharp tug at his left arm. He snaps around to look at the person with the strong grip—an older man who's yet to release his hand. His touch shocks Chris awake.

"C'mon over here. Walk this way," he says, pulling Chris towards him. "You almost fell over the edge."

Heart pounding, Chris eyes the other passengers, but no one else seems to notice him. "No, I wasn't," he says, yanking his arm away but nevertheless complying. "I'm alright. I just slipped." He looks again at the train tracks.

"Hey. You ok?" The man says to him.

Chris's eyes dart everywhere: the tracks, the people on the opposite platform, the strange man speaking to him. He tastes the burnt caramel flavor of rum on his tongue. He feels the rumbling in his gut. This isn't some twisted fantasy. It's all really happening. What had he done?

"You drunk?" The man's voice is deep and calm, the sound of a father addressing his son.

It's the sound of his own father addressing him. Chris can even see his father's disappointment in the man's squinted eyes and furrowed brows. He hasn't forgotten the shame that used to swell like boils underneath his skin whenever his father looked at him this way; a look that suggested that not only was Chris embarrassing himself, he was embarrassing his father too. Such a moment occurred when Chris first kissed another boy—Tyrell Jamieson—back in middle school.

Although Chris had very few hobbies growing up, he decided to enroll in his school's dance class on a whim. On the first day, Chris positioned himself in the back of the dance studio, where he first caught a glimpse of Tyrell. He was instantly enamored with Tyrell's awkwardness: the way his long, skinny limbs flopped and fumbled about, the way he spoke very little and never raised his hand to answer a question, the way he mirrored Chris's own perception of himself—quiet and timid. Chris found himself drawn closer and closer to Tyrell each day until he occupied the space next to him.

They became friends in the slow, gradual way one would expect from two quiet and shy thirteen-year-olds. Their connection started from a shared goal: to not look foolish in front of the entire class. So, they helped each other out, filling in the gaps in each other's dance moves. Chris was a fast learner, but his execution was sometimes sloppy. By contrast, Tyrell paid deliberate attention to form but often fell behind the pace of the class.

They remained this way until about mid-semester when Tyrell's mere presence started to make Chris's palms sweat. Chris had a sudden, confusing urge to both be near him and to run away.

On one day, Chris cornered Tyrell in the bathroom without much of a clear plan in mind. He waited for Tyrell to finish washing his hands at the line of sinks against the wall. "Hey," he said.

Tyrell half-turned, his eyes narrow with suspicion. "What?"

Not knowing what else to do, Chris rushed in to plant a wet kiss onto Tyrell's lips. Tyrell's dry, chapped lips were sealed tight, denying Chris's eager tongue entry.

The proceeding events happened in a flash: the tussle, the growing audience of boys, the teachers who came to break them up. Tyrell pinned Chris down on the piss-stained floor and punched him—twice in the jaw, once in the eye, and numerous other times everywhere else.

When his father arrived to pick Chris up that afternoon, there was a brief second when Chris hesitated to enter his father's car, wanting instead to turn and run

away. But there was no other place for Chris to go. No one else to turn to. He had no other relatives: no grandmother, grandfather, uncles, aunts, or mother. According to his father, they only had each other. Chris didn't need anyone else but him. And that was the way it would always be—until it wasn't.

When they made it home, Chris waited near the car while his father trudged towards the porch steps. He hadn't said anything to Chris all afternoon. "Deddy?" Chris looked not at his father but at the chipped, wooden steps underneath his father's feet. He hadn't seemed to notice how worn down they were.

"Yeah," his father said, pausing by the front door.

Chris never told his father about his interest in other boys. It was just one of those unspoken truths between them. His father never asked. Chris never told. This was their way for everything. They rarely discussed anything of real substance, at least never at great length. Most of their conversations were a series of short utterances:

Did you like the movie?

No.

Why not?

Just 'cause.

Well, I did.

"You mad at me, Deddy?" Chris asked, darting his eyes in his father's direction then away again.

"No, Chris. Of course not." His father only half-turning towards him.

He looked at his father's profile, at the pained but concerned expression on his face. He walked closer to him, stopping just in front of the porch steps where his father stood.

"Be careful out here, Chris. It's not safe." His father almost whispered when he said this, then paused as if considering the right words to say next. "You can't just go letting everybody know that about you. Can't just go running up and kissing boys like that."

"He was my only friend and—"

"You think that's what friends do? Have you seen me kiss Charles or any of my other friends?!"

There it was: anger. Chris knew it was coming, knew the yelling would start. "Ugh...."

"Just because you friends," his father goes on, looking directly at him now, "don't mean you each other's lil' *boyfriend*. You're in for a whole lot of trouble thinking that, boy." He turned away and walked inside, leaving Chris there on the porch alone.

On the platform, Chris shoots another look at the strange man watching him, then walks over to an empty bench. The man looks middle-aged—maybe forty. Handsome, with large brown eyes and a thick beard speckled with strands of gray

hair. He's dressed in heavy denim and what appears to be workman's boots. Rashaad. He looks like a Rashaad.

As Chris takes a seat on the cold bench, Rashaad walks and stands to the side of him, waiting for an answer to the question Chris has already forgotten. "Are you drunk?" he repeats.

"Oh, no," Chris lies. "I only had a couple drinks. I ain't drunk."

"Yeah, probably a couple too many."

Chris feels Rashaad's eyes on him. Several seconds of silence pass this way. Too many seconds. What does Rashaad see? Is it his rigid face? The listlessness in his eyes? The way Chris sinks into himself like an ever-crumpling ball? Chris straightens his back and relaxes his face, but it seems to be too late. Rashaad's on to him.

"Is someone expecting you somewhere?" Rashaad asks.

"I'm good." Chris offers a half-smile, but it dissolves.

"You sure?"

Chris nods.

"Well, just stay away from the tracks, ok?" Rashaad walks away towards the heating bulbs. He's gone before Chris can think of the right words to say. He should've said *something* else to Rashaad, something kind. *Thank you?* But, as usual, words fail him. He pulls out a small bottle of rum from his coat pocket and takes a sip.

But just as Chris begins to relax, someone lets out a sharp cry on the opposite platform, causing him to spill the remaining rum on his legs. It's an elderly man rummaging through his big, brown sack of stuff. He must be in his late sixties, Chris decides. Maybe older. And he shows all the signs of homelessness: clothing that hangs from his spindly body like rags, a thin blanket draped over his shoulders, a bag containing everything he owns. Vincent. That will be his name.

Vincent expels the contents of his bag, each of his trinkets rolling about on the grimy platform. Groaning, he kneels to finger through each precious artifact, garnering little attention from the other passengers.

For some reason, Vincent can't seem to find whatever he's lost. He's unable to understand how he could've left it at some other place, perhaps at some other train station. *Had it fallen out somewhere in the snowstorm?* he must be asking himself. *Was it buried someplace deep?*

Chris wants to help the man retrace his footsteps, but he doesn't.

Vincent soon gives up on his frantic search. With both hands, he scoops up his things, grabbing one item here and one item there, as if a certain order must be followed. When he finishes, he sits down in his corner of the platform, far away from everyone else. Another day, another loss.

A tear rolls down Chris's face. Who would care if he died? Who would even know? He swipes the warm tear away, but it quickly chills from the cold.

“Well, shit,” Rashaad says, returning to the bench. “I swear every time it gets cold, the L wants to fuck up.” He takes a seat next to Chris on the bench. “Can’t ever count on the CTA for shit. Can you believe this?”

“Nah, it’s crazy.” Once again, Chris can feel Rashaad looking at him. Men like Rashaad, those “tough, rugged” types, like his father’s old friends, always see right through Chris, his secrets spilling out for them to see. When he was younger, they wore the same curious expressions around Chris, looking at him in bewilderment as if attempting to decode some deep mystery. His father’s friends usually gathered at their house on Saturdays for beers and shit talking. And whenever Chris was around, these men burdened Chris with their “masculine wisdom”: how to get girls (which ones to go after, which ones to leave alone), how to establish the appropriate image (to garner respect from his peers), and which vocational schools to apply to after high school. Chris waited for the appropriate moments to nod his head in agreement until the men found something else to talk about. He never once looked them in the eye.

“Hey. Did you hear me?” Rashaad is saying now.

“Huh?”

“I was saying...do you have any big plans tonight?” Rashaad squints. “You seem out of it. You ok?”

Chris opens his mouth, and a loud gasp threatens to escape his throat. He tries not to choke up when he speaks. “No. Not really. I mean, I’m fine. I just don’t know where I’m headed yet.” When the weather’s nice, he usually finds himself wandering the streets of Boystown, watching the men loiter around the bars, laughing and carrying on. They’re so fascinating to him, yet incomprehensible. It’s the way they seem to glide through the world, many of them blustering from one space to the next with apparent ease. Strangers kiss in and out of bars. Lovers walk hand and hand, deeply in love or lust. It’s as if they all share some inside secret. “I might go to Boystown,” Chris says, “for a drink.”

“Oh, really? That’s cool. So, I’m guessing you like to dance?”

“Not really. I’m not a dancer.” The only time Chris dances these days is after taking multiple shots of tequila. He’ll stumble over to some empty corner of a bar and groove to whatever is playing over the speakers. Eyes closed, he imagines himself in junior high again dancing with Tyrell in dance class. That’s the only time he thinks of him, these moments alone on the dance floor. Nevertheless, something always breaks his trance. Someone will either bump into him, or as is most often the case, Chris will see the image of Tyrell punching and punching at his face.

Rashaad shudders from the cold. “So, you don’t dance with other men? Why you go?” There’s a loud buzzing from Rashaad’s coat pocket. “Ugh—what now?” He snatches out the cell phone, pokes at the screen, and blurts a *bello*.

Everyone on the platform stirs from this breach of silence, peering at the two of them on the bench.

There's a woman yelling on the phone, but her words are too fast for Chris to make sense of. Out of the corner of his eye, he notices Rashaad's thigh begin to shake.

Meanwhile, the purple line train to Evanston arrives for the passengers on the opposite platform. If Chris wanted to, he could cross over to the other side and make it.

"Ok, so what do you want me to do about it?" Rashaad is saying. "He's a child. Of course, he don't all-the-way understand." He groans. The woman on the phone is crying, and Rashaad doesn't hesitate to hang up on her. He barks something indecipherable into the air, expelling a large, misty cloud of spit. "I bet you wondering what all that was about."

"Not really." Chris lies. He watches the purple line take off. "That's your business."

Rashaad laughs, but it's thin and joyless. "You always this friendly?"

Chris glares at him. "You saying I'm rude?" It was a dumb question, Chris knew. Even he had enough self-awareness to know how off-putting he must be.

"Hey"—Rashaad looks away, taking a moment to stare into space, as if stumbling upon a new thought— "Can I ask you a personal question?"

Chris's scowl quickly muddles into furrowed brows. He looks away. "What could you possibly want to ask...me?" His stomach is heavy with the weight of rum. He puts his hand there to soothe it.

"When did you come out?"

"Uh..."

"Don't get offended," Rashaad says. "I was just wondering. You mentioned Boystown and...never mind. I guess I just wanted to know what it would've been like to come out at your age."

"What you mean?"

"It's hard when you got a wife and kids." Rashaad laughs. "How you explain something like that to a child?"

On the other platform, Vincent cries out again.

Chris jumps from the sound, then studies Vincent, wondering if it's the lost item again or something else. But then he realizes what Rashaad's just said and looks at him.

"Oh well," Rashaad says. "Better late than never, right?"

"Right..." In all his twenty-two years of his life, Chris has never had such a personal conversation with another man. To think that a man like Rashaad went through the world pretending, marrying and giving birth to a life he probably never wanted in the first place, is an awful fate even Chris can't imagine.

"Fifteen years wasted," Rashaad adds.

"That sucks. I don't know what I would do."

“Finally told the kids this week. That was fun. Then tonight I see you wobbling at the edge over there and figured I could finally do something good for once.”

“So, were you also checking me out? Is that why you—”

“No,” Rashaad says, standing up. “That’s not what’s happening here.” He laughs.

Chris winces at his chuckle, and the conversation lulls after this. He turns his attention to his dark, dry hands, wishing they would somehow grow large enough for him to hide behind.

“I’m freezing,” Rashaad says after a moment. “I’m gone go head over to the heat.” He reaches for Chris’s hand. “Take care.”

“You too,” Chris says, reciprocating the gesture, feeling, once again, at a loss for the appropriate words. His hand feels limp under the firmness of Rashaad’s grip. Chris balls his hand up as if to shake off his touch, but the weight of Rashaad’s hand lingers.

When the train’s light emerges in the distance, his chest tightens. Chris stands, and when the train arrives, he careens towards Rashaad, boarding the same train car as him, finding an empty seat in the back six rows away. His legs shake as he lowers to sit, but he doesn’t know why. It’s not like he’s going to *do* anything. This is just a little thing he pretends to do, a little lie that he tells himself. It’s the same lie that propelled him to Chicago in the first place: that he will stop waiting and act.

“This is a Red Line train,” the prerecord announces. It’s a common refrain Chris knows by heart.

Between Chris and Rashaad, there are several people: a trio of college students, a musician with his suited guitar, and a young girl with her father.

“Daddy, when will we get home,” the little girl says. “I’m so tired.”

“Soon sweetie,” her father says, consumed by the contents of his cell phone.

After twenty minutes, Rashaad stands up and holds onto the rail. He’ll be getting off soon. Chris scours his mind for something to say, words that will prolong Rashaad’s stay. But before he can think, Rashaad moves closer to the door. Chris darts forward two rows, then, after another stop, a third.

“Hey guy.”

Chris whips his head around. “What?” But he sees that it’s only the little girl. She and her father are now two rows behind him.

“Umm,” she says, “why do you keep moving up seats?”

Did Rashaad hear her? He checks. No. Rashaad’s still standing by the door, looking out of the window.

“Is this a game? Can I play?” The girl continues, her mouth as wide as it is loud.

“No Darla, you can’t,” her father says, phone still planted in his face. “Now leave that man alone.”

She frowns but complies.

When Chris turns back around, Rashaad is gone. The doors of the train are wide open. Chris looks and sees him heading towards the steps.

Chris makes a leap for it, but he's too late. The doors have closed. He bangs on the door, hoping that the train conductor will let him out.

"Hey!" The little girl shouts. "The man needs to get out!"

The doors jerk open again, and Chris races out onto the platform. He jogs down the slick steps of the Belmont station, almost falling. When he exits onto the street, he scans the area for Rashaad, spotting him on the opposite sidewalk. Without so much as a glance in either direction, Chris runs across the street, just missing the front end of a sedan. The driver manages to screech to a halt before hitting him.

Rashaad turns around at this sudden noise.

Chris ducks behind a parked car.

The driver sits there and honks repeatedly at Chris, and an old woman with hard-boiled eyes shouts expletives from the passenger-side window.

When the car finally skirts off, Chris rises again, but by now, Rashaad is even further away. Chris nevertheless trots along, his burning chest heavy with mucus, his congested nose runny from the cold. He pulls out another miniature-sized bottle of rum and gulps the whole thing down in one swallow before pulling out yet another.

They turn the corner onto an empty residential street. Chris wrangles his way through the unpaved snow, trying not to squeak in the icy slush. He can't help but do so anyway. After each block he walks in pursuit of Rashaad, he fights the urge to turn and go home. But something dark and ominous is propelling him forward, a looming dread nipping at his heels, the feeling that he *too* is being chased by some strange being. But, by what? He isn't sure. All he knows is that time is slipping away.

It isn't long before Rashaad stops in front of what Chris assumes to be his apartment. Before Rashaad can even reach in his pocket for his keys, Chris runs up behind him, closing his eyes midway, as if that'll somehow make the next few moments any easier. But he opens his eyes when he starts to slip again.

"What the hell?" He hears Rashaad say.

Chris falls hard on a patch of ice at the base of the steps where Rashaad is standing.

"What you doing following me? Are you crazy or something?"

"Um," Chris says, struggling to get on his feet. "I just came to—"

"To what?"

To what? To what? To what? Chris finally stands but doesn't know whether to run away or move in closer, so he stays put. "Can we just go somewhere and talk some more? I got a lot on my mind right now and no one else to talk to."

"I don't even know your name, son." Rashaad shakes his head, then turns to open his front door.

Chris rushes in closer, stopping just a step down from where Rashaad is standing.

“Hey!” Rashaad pivots around. “Don’t run up on me like that.”

Chris reaches out a hand. “I’m Chris.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I’m sorry,” Chris mumbles. He’s getting dizzy and must place a hand on the cold, wet banister to keep from falling.

Rashaad stares down at him, perhaps in awe or in contemplation. “Step back,” he says. “Now.”

Chris kneels in front of him on the steps, sneezing and coughing. “Please, just hear me out, Rashaad.”

“Who the hell is Rashaad?” The man stares, then pulls a cell phone from his back pocket. “My name is Derek.”

“No, please. Don’t call the police. We can just go down the street over there to that restaurant.” He points to his left, to some restaurant that isn’t there.

Derek grabs Chris’s hand and pulls him to his feet. “Where do you live? I’m calling you a cab.”

“You sat down next to me at the station”—Chris points a sharp finger at Derek now—“and told me that sad story...and, *and*” he pauses, conjuring up more conviction, “*this* can’t be any stranger than that.”

“I was venting to a stranger on my way home. *This* is a bit different—Oh, hello. Yeah, I need a cab—”

“Stop.” Chris reaches to grab his phone but misses as Derek pulls back.

Derek’s grim expression sharpens to anger, his unencumbered hand tightening to a fist before returning limp. He turns the knob of his front door and goes inside, leaving the door cracked just wide enough to maintain a clear view of Chris. “Yeah. It’s near Sheridan,” he’s telling the operator now.

Chris stares at Derek from the steps. His fingers are freezing cold, but he barely feels them. Snow melts on his face, mixing in with the tears he isn’t even aware are there. He sees Derek’s hand catching him just as he stumbled off the platform, like some divine intervention. “You were the only one who saw me,” Chris slurs. “No one else saw me or cared if I fell over...” He drifts off, resting his head against the banister. “That’s got to count for something,” he says, as Derek hangs up the phone. “That means something, right?”

“What has to mean something? What you talking about?” Derek returns, standing just outside his front door.

“You were there for a reason tonight.” The snow is starting to pick up again. Chris looks up at the sky, at the source of this sudden downpour. “I think I was supposed to meet you.” He tries to stand again but falters, falling back on the banister for support.

“Man, you losing it.” Derek tries to get Chris to sit down but to no avail. “Fine. Suit yourself.”

Chris turns away towards the street, then back towards Derek. "I never really came out to anyone before. That's why I didn't answer you when you asked."

"Sorry to hear that." Derek rubs his gloved hands together to shake off the cold. "Look. I get that you must be lonely, and I feel for that"—he looks down the street, after the sound of a passing car—"but you can't just follow people home. You don't know what I might've did to you."

Chris begins to speak but stops. There's nothing he can say to refute this. Tyrell's fists made certain of that.

"I'll tell you this—"

"No, stop. It's cool. I'm good." Chris swallows hard. How pathetic of him to be doing this. How stupid he was to think this would work. Here he is on the porch of a man he met on a train, a man he'd named, a man he'd created for himself. And here he is being confronted with the reality of it all: Derek isn't the man who will save him. And he hates Derek for this reminder. He hates him. There's no other way Chris can explain the sudden nausea, the pounding in his chest, his inability to breathe or speak. "You should've just let me fucking fall," he barks, before folding over and vomiting on the steps. A mess of orange chunks sprays out into the snow.

"Ugh, shit," Derek says. "Come on. Just come on. Come inside." He secures Chris's arm and pulls him inside. "Can't let you die out here on my porch."

Once inside, they walk down a long, narrow hallway until they reach Derek's bathroom.

"There's got to be somebody I can call for you. *Somebody*. Right?" Derek stands in the doorway watching Chris vomit into the toilet, his expression pensive and anxious.

"No"—Chris pauses, wiping a string of spit hanging from his mouth—"my father's dead."

"So, you don't have *anyone*." Derek stares at Chris a moment, then leaves. He returns seconds later with a towel to wipe the vomit from Chris's face. He turns the knob of the faucet and soaks the towel with it. "For someone so close to the edge, you must've been in a lot of pain." He drains the towel, then gives it to Chris. "You can stay here tonight. If that's what you want." Derek's voice is soft now, almost at a whisper. "I know about pain. But some things you can't come back from."

"I had a friend. At some point." Chris makes a haphazard effort at wiping his face.

"I'm sure. Just wipe that off your face"—Derek kneels next to the sink—"and I'll find you a place to sleep."

"He punched me," Chris says, "for trying to kiss him." Then a boom of sound erupts from his throat, a mix of coughing and laughter. He drops the towel. "And now I followed you home. Lord."

Derek grabs the towel and tries to wipe the rest of the vomit from Chris's chin.

“You think I’m crazy. Crazy Chris.”

But Derek doesn’t respond. “I’ll get you some water,” he says, dropping the towel and leaving the bathroom.

After Chris is finished cleaning up, Derek walks him to the living room. Besides a single gray couch and sofa, the room is bare. By now, Chris lays mostly limp against Derek’s side. And when Derek releases him onto the couch, Chris can barely feel himself sinking into the large impressions of its saggy cushions. His droopy eyes stare at the cracks in the ceiling while Derek removes the wet, snowy shoes from his rigid feet. Chris cannot feel his icy, pale toes. He can barely feel anything. “I want to be remembered someday,” he whispers, the electric train tracks burned into his mind. “But who am I? What would you even remember?” But Chris, his eyes now closed, drowns out whatever Derek has to say to this. He only hears the hum of his voice, the low, mumbled thumping of his words, and the sound of another train passing nearby—its high-pitched squeal urgent and unmistakable.